

Intensive work with other alcoholics

From drinking 'not much and not often', to blacking out nearly every time she drank, this long-term AA member now lives a life of service.

I'm a recovered alcoholic. For those who are new in AA or just thinking about coming, when I say recovered, I don't mean I'm cured of alcoholism because that's just not so. But I've been relieved of the symptoms of alcoholism. I haven't had to have a drink for nearly 40 years. To me that would have proved I don't have a drinking problem. It's not a drinking problem; this is an actual disease I have.

As a child I was always shy and scared; a redhead who used to blush at the drop of a hat and found it very difficult to be with people. I never felt I fitted in, always felt like I was a square peg in a round hole and I shifted schools a lot, so I was constantly under new pressures from new places and new people.

When I got to sixteen and had left school, I started drinking - not much and not often, and I didn't think it caused any problems in my life. In fact, it made me, feel better but at the same time I didn't like what felt like a lack of control whenever I drank.

On one occasion, while I was nursing, I drank too much and totally blacked out, and couldn't remember anything about how I got home. And I just thought that was what happened to everyone when got drunk, which is what kept me being very careful about the amount I drank. But it happened again sometime later and I knew I had to be especially careful with drinking.

I got married and had a child. Once again, drank very rarely, but every time I drank, it seemed to me there was trouble attached to it somehow. And after three kids, I left that first marriage. By that stage, I had started taking tablets for my nerves and when I left that marriage and came back to the South Island, I started drinking in strange places, places I'd never drunk before.

The Big Book talks about seeking out sordid places, and I did. And my behaviour started to become sordid as well. And things just got worse. They say the disease is progressive, and it certainly was for me. And I got into trouble often with my drinking. Only a few years later I was appearing in the courts because of my behaviour. Then my husband died unexpectedly, which gave me permission to drink even more. So every time I drank, things were going wrong.

After a while I ended up in a treatment centre for alcoholism, where I knew that they would apologise for the counsellor having made a mistake in thinking I was an alcoholic. Because I knew I certainly wasn't. I thought alcoholics were men, I thought they lived in parks, and I didn't do that, therefore I wasn't an alcoholic. After all, I'd grown up in a middle class family and had elocution lessons and piano lessons, so how can I possibly be alcoholic?

But a few days after I got into the treatment centre, I learned about alcoholism. They convinced me that absolutely I was an alcoholic and showed me all the signs and symptoms that I had. And each one of us has different signs and symptoms of our alcoholism.

My biggest symptom was I had blackouts and I would end up in bed with men I had no idea who they were. And that was not my normal behaviour. When I wasn't drinking, I never did that. Wouldn't have dreamt of it. But I absolutely did not know how I got home the night before, or what had happened, And I thought when people said that, it was just pure excuse, and even in the treatment centre, I continued to think that.

Anyway, I was introduced to AA in the treatment centre. They told me I would have to go to AA if I wanted to stay sober. Well, actually, I didn't want to stay sober. I just wanted the trouble to stop, and I wanted the man out of my bed. That was the bottom line, and they told me that, well, the way to do that will be to go to AA, don't drink, get a sponsor, do the steps and you'll be fine.

And this just sounded too simple for me. You know, I was an intelligent woman, and I wanted to know the whys and wherefore. And I asked why so many times, they told me that I had analysis paralysis. That I was just going round and round in circles trying to find the why. And they said, it actually doesn't matter why you've got alcoholism, it's the reality is you have, and you have to treat it.

So I ended up going to AA against my will. I felt guilty every time the Preamble was read and it said the only requirement for membership of AA was a desire to stop drinking, because, as I said, I didn't desire to stop drinking. But I did stop and I was going to AA for about nine months giving my name and saying "I'm an alcoholic", but deep down not believing that.

After nine months, I was at a meeting, and a man said something that shifted my thoughts from my head where I knew I was an alcoholic to my heart where I believed it. And that was a huge difference. I can't remember what he said - but he made me think, oh my god, I'm an alcoholic! This was brand new information that changed my so-called recovery almost instantly, and I started working the steps again on a different level. If I knew what it was that he said, I'd pack it up and I'd give it to other people. But maybe that wouldn't have helped them, because we all hear things very differently in the fellowship. I've gone to meetings where someone said, oh, what a great meeting. And I've thought what a load of rubbish that one was. So, you know, we all hear it so differently. And so for me, I kept on going to the meetings.

I did what little service I could, which was setting up chairs and hanging up banners and doing the dishes, that sort of thing, and doing the steps. But I thought I'd done the first five or six steps in the treatment centre, and it wasn't until I was about three years sober and I got a new sponsor, and she started me working the steps by using the Big Book, exactly as it was written, taking me through the Big Book and getting me to do the steps as we got to them. And we got through them very quickly. I just kept going to AA and I kept sponsoring other women, helping them do the steps like I'd been taught.

You know, that's how you'll get sober because I now know that going to meetings does not get me sober. Going to meetings can give me some relief, but it certainly doesn't get me sober. The only thing that's got me sober has been working the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, and yet I hadn't wanted to do a lot of them because they talked about God and I wasn't interested in God. And then they had things called Traditions hanging on the wall and I didn't want to do any of that because I thought that was for the bosses of AA. And, you know, I didn't want to be told by anyone what to do and what not to do. So I just kept coming, going to AA, kept taking women to meetings in my car.

I'm just pleased I stayed in a place I didn't even want to be, doing something I didn't even want to do, which was to get sober long enough for my life to have been turned around totally.

I've never been to court. I haven't had the police knocking on my door since I got sober. I've had a whole lot of things taken out of my life and my life is more normal now. I could walk down the main street of any city in New Zealand, or the world, and no one's going to look at me and think, there's a reject if ever I saw one. Because I just look like any other woman my age walking down the street. And so I'm just really grateful that AA turned my life around, even though I didn't think it needed turning around. I can live with myself now. I can look in the mirror and not hate the person I'm looking at.

Being self-supporting

One of the great things about Alcoholics Anonymous is that we don't take money from outside sources. We have a tradition, which is all about self-support, and self-support is not just the money in the basket. It's about keeping the organization going. It's helping send out pamphlets. It's conducting meetings in prisons. It's doing a number of things that keeps AA going. And we talk about this as AA service. And I've been privileged to do service at many levels. And I'm just so pleased that I belong to a Fellowship where we don't have our hand out asking for help from anyone. I'm willing, and any alcoholic who has got sober through Alcoholics Anonymous always wants to give back.

I don't want to be one of the takers in AA. I want to be one of the givers and for me being a giver means that I do hang up the banners and set out the chairs and take women to meetings and sponsor women and work on various committees. And yet every time I've been asked to do something for AA, my immediate reaction in my head is no. I never want to do it but as the Big Book says, you know, nothing will ensure my sobriety more than intensive work with other alcoholics. And if I'm not doing service, I'm not doing intensive work with anyone. Not even myself.